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ABSTRACT

The New York State Office of Rural Affairs has developed an innovative network of 17 Rural Services Institutes (RSIs) located at colleges and universities throughout the state in order to help meet the needs of rural communities. RSIs operate with minimal cost to the state and involve few bureaucratic constraints. Each RSI shares expertise and resources with other RSIs, providing rural communities with a collaborative statewide resource network. This paper discusses how the idea for the RSI network came about, how the network was implemented how RSIs are structured at each college, and network functioning and coordination. A case study of the RSI at the State University of New York College at Potsdam examines the process by which the RSI was established at the college; the RSI's mission and goals; its administration and governance structure, including funding; the process used to determine priorities; services provided and their impact; and links between public services of the RSI and the college's overall educational mission. Community services provided by the Potsdam RSI include assistance and training in grant writing, local training for social services professionals, needs assessment and other support related to developing locally accessible education for health care professionals, technical assistance and consultation services for organizations engaged in economic development, technical assistance for local governments, and public educational seminars. (Author/SV)

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# THE RURAL SERVICES INSTITUTES NETWORK AS A STRATEGY FOR ASSISTING RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NEW YORK STATE

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ABSTRACT

The New York State Office of Rural Affairs has developed an innovative network of Rural Services Institutes (RSIs) located at colleges and universities throughout the State in order to help meet the needs of the State's rural communities. Through the resources and expertise available at college campuses, the RSI network blends the best of government and academe's community service functions to bring a wide variety of services to rural governments, businesses, organizations and individuals.

Currently, 17 RSIs are operating to meet the unique needs of the communities in which they are located. The RSIs operate with minimal cost to the state and involve few bureaucratic constraints. Each RSI shares expertise and resources with other participating RSIs, providing rural communities with a collaborative, statewide resource network.

This paper will discuss the development and implementation of Rural Services Institutes at colleges and universities throughout the rural regions of New York State, including:

1. How the idea for the RSI network was formed;
2. How the RSI network was implemented;
3. How RSIs are structured at each college;
4. The functioning and coordination of the RSI network;
5. One case study: The actual working of the RSI at the State University of New York College at Potsdam.

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## INTRODUCTION

Although most people think of New York City when they think of New York, nearly 3.5 million people live in the rural areas of New York State. Rural New York comprises 88% of the State's total land mass. In fact, rural New York would be the 36th largest state, roughly equivalent to the size of Kentucky, Indiana or West Virginia. Rural areas in New York State, like their counterparts across America, frequently suffer from a lack of fiscal and technical resources necessary to provide basic community services or to promote development and growth. In an effort to address the needs of its rural communities, in 1986, New York State created the State Office of Rural Affairs.

Since then, one of the ways that the State Office of Rural Affairs has met the needs of the State's rural areas is through an innovative network of Rural Services Institutes (RSIs) located at colleges and universities throughout the State. Through the resources and expertise available at member campuses, the RSI network blends the best of government and academe's community service functions to bring a wide variety of services to rural governments, businesses, organizations and individuals. Currently, 17 RSIs are operating to meet the unique needs of the communities in which they are located. The RSIs operate with minimal cost to the State and involve few bureaucratic constraints. Each RSI shares expertise and resources with other participating RSIs, providing

rural communities with a collaborative, statewide resource network.

This paper will discuss how the idea for the RSI network was formed and implemented, how the RSIs are established and structured on various campuses, the purpose and functions of the RSIs, the operation and coordination of the RSI network, and a case study of the working of the RSI at the State University of New York College at Potsdam.

## BACKGROUND

The rural areas of New York State, like other rural areas of the country, suffer from geographic isolation and limited fiscal capacity, which, generally, have resulted in such problems as: higher rates of poverty and unemployment; lower levels of educational attainment, employment skills, and vocational training; and more limited access to health care, social services, and modern telecommunications systems.[1] The rural areas of New York State have a shortage of physicians and other health care providers as well as difficulty in attracting personnel to areas with the greatest need for services. Many rural hospitals in New York are technologically obsolescent with respect to their facilities and equipment, and many rural residents face gaps in health care coverage between jobs. Other institutions, such as school districts, face higher costs because of the diseconomies of scale of operating in a rural area.

Further, the lack of private sector capital, adequate public transportation, and technological capacity has inhibited economic growth in most of New York's rural areas. In the areas where growth is occurring, communities are confronted with a lack of experience and consistency in municipal land use practices. Rural areas have a need for increased planning and technical assistance, with an emphasis on mitigating developmental impacts on the rural land resource base, while simultaneously increasing the area's economic viability.

Income in the rural counties of New York State tends to lag behind that of the non-rural counties, even when the national economy is strong. During the eight-year period between 1980 and 1988, income in the rural counties of New York State rose only 79.4 percent, while income in the non-rural counties rose 83.8 percent.[2] Comparing per capita incomes by county, the ten counties with the lowest per capita income in 1978 were all rural. In 1988, the ten counties with the lowest per capita income were, still, all rural. Of the ten counties with the highest per capita income in 1978 and 1988, only one was a rural county.

Employment figures for the rural areas of New York State are equally disheartening. Throughout the 1980s, average unemployment rates were significantly higher in the rural counties than in the non-rural counties of New York State. And, as can be seen below, the rural counties have consistently had higher unemployment rates than New York State as a whole.

| | 1980 | 1988 | 1989 |
|---|---|---|---|
| RURAL COUNTIES | 8.3% | 5.3% | 6.2% |
| NON-RURAL COUNTIES | 6.7% | 3.7% | 4.5% |
| NEW YORK STATE | 7.5% | 4.2% | 5.1% |

As might be expected, high unemployment tends to be endemic to some counties. Of the ten counties with the highest unemployment rates in 1980, nine were rural. Eight of those nine counties were among the ten counties with the highest unemployment rates again in 1989.

While the rural areas of New York State face these daunting and often seemingly insurmountable problems, many public and private policy makers and the media focus on the ills that plague the urban areas of the State, like New York City. The lack of awareness of the nature and extent of the problems in rural areas by policy makers and the media, and the inability of urban people to understand rural concerns, is, often, tantamount to the rural problems themselves. On account of that lack of understanding, rural areas, in the past, have received limited state and federal resources, and have been undermined by regulatory standards and procedures that do not take into consideration the unique circumstances and needs of rural communities.

## THE HISTORY AND ROLE OF THE STATE OFFICE OF RURAL AFFAIRS

In order to help State government better address the needs of the 3.5 million people living in rural New York, the State Office of Rural Affairs was established by the Rural Affairs Act of 1986. The Office was established in the executive department of New York State government, making it the first cabinet-level state agency in the nation devoted solely to the interests and needs of a state's rural areas. The Office is headed by the Director of Rural Affairs, who is appointed by the Governor, with the advice and consent of the State Senate.

In creating the Office of Rural Affairs, the Governor and State Legislature demonstrated their recognition of the fact that the State's rural regions have been characterized by inaccurate awareness and understanding, resulting in laws, regulations, policies and programs that do not completely address the real needs of the people living in the State's rural areas. They also recognized that the diversity of the rural regions of the State, with their abundant natural, cultural, human, and community resources, contributes greatly to the quality of life of all people of the State and, hence, to a healthier and more prosperous State.[3]

It was found that many useful and innovative responses to rural needs would be possible, if a permanent, more focused and coordinated interdisciplinary approach to addressing rural problems and opportunities were made available through State government.[4] Through the creation of the Office of Rural Affairs, the State's policy makers sought to amplify the efforts of existing agencies and individuals who are interested in such rural policy areas as human services and community life; health care; education; business, economic development, and employment; agriculture; environment, land use, and natural resources; transportation; community facilities, housing and community revitalization; and local government management.

Thus, the purposes of the Office of Rural Affairs are to promote cooperative and integrated efforts to address rural needs statewide; to recommend to the Governor and the Legislature policies and plans to meet rural needs; and to serve as a one-stop contact point for rural governments, service providers, and State and federal agencies interested in rural policies and programs of the State. The Office accomplishes these purposes through the use of diverse means and methods.

For example, the Office of Rural Affairs operates the Rural Assistance Information Network (RAIN), a computer service containing over 1700 State and federal financial and technical assistance programs. The information on RAIN is accessible via computer modem 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and is provided free of charge, except for the cost of the telephone call. In addition to the federal and State financial and technical assistance programs, the RAIN database includes: data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the National Physicians Register, the New York State Department of Labor self-search job database, a legal section and legislative directory, and a message-based electronic mail system for all users. Since everyone does not have access to a computer and modem, the Office of Rural Affairs has designated 90 organizations throughout rural New York that serve as public access points for RAIN. These organizations have agreed to make their equipment available for RAIN searches as a service to members of their communities.

The Office of Rural Affairs also produces a yearly series of live, interactive, video teleconferences on its Rural Satellite Network (RSN). Through this service, the Office is able to use modern technology to bring technical assistance and information to the most rural areas of New York State in a very cost- and time-efficient manner. Topics that have been covered on the RSN include: grantsmanship, zoning and land use planning, municipal liability, rural housing, and rural emergency medical services.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RURAL SERVICES INSTITUTES

In the effort to fulfill its role to promote cooperative and integrated efforts to address rural needs, in March 1989, the Office of Rural Affairs began establishing Rural Services Institutes (RSIs) at educational institutions across the State.

The presence of higher education institutions in rural areas of New York State was found to be an under-utilized asset. The State University of New York (SUNY) is the largest and most diverse public multi-campus university system in the world. Thirty-six of its sixty-four campuses are located in rural regions of the State. The independent sector of higher education in New York State comprises over 100 campuses and is the largest in the nation. Twenty-eight of the campuses are located in rural counties throughout the State. The faculty and staff at these institutions could provide educational resources and expertise that would be invaluable and, otherwise unavailable in rural areas, for skill enhancement and technical consultation.

Further, the RSIs on State University campuses help to fulfill the mission of the State University of New York, which pledges the sharing of its resources and expertise with the business, agricultural, governmental, labor and nonprofit sectors of the State through a program of public service for the purpose of enhancing the well-being of the people of the State of New York."

## PURPOSE AND FUNCTION OF THE RSIS

The purpose of the Rural Services Institutes (RSIs) is to facilitate the efforts of local agencies, individuals, and the private sector in developing cooperative responses to rural needs. The RSIs accomplish this by providing technical and educational assistance, and by encouraging a comprehensive, strategic approach to rural problem solving with four guiding principles:

1. **Working together to enhance the quality of life for all rural New Yorkers:** Many public agencies, rural businesses, and community organizations are interested in enhancing the quality of life in rural New York. Too often, however, these entities are working against each other to advance their own parochial interests. Other times, they are not combining their efforts to achieve the greatest possible gain. The constituents of rural New York must work together in order to solve the problems that plague their regions and to enhance their collective quality of life.
2. **Taking a regional approach to problem solving:** Although a number of State and federal agencies are involved in rural development and revitalization efforts on a large scale, many of the problems and issues that confront rural areas are of a regional or local nature. Furthermore, even with issues of broad significance, the need still exists for technical assistance and collaboration at the regional or local level to access State or federal programs and decision makers. The RSI concept uses a regional approach to addressing rural problems. This approach often results in solutions that can be applied in other regions of the State and statewide.
3. **Coordinating the RSIs into a statewide network:** Many of the issues and problems that arise in rural areas are common throughout all regions of the State. Rural regions must collaborate in order to successfully address common rural needs. The RSIs in the various regions of the State may coordinate their activity to address issues or solve problems common to more than one region. In situations that require a multi-regional or statewide approach, the Office of Rural Affairs serves as a coordinator and facilitator.
4. **Serving as a Resource for the Office of Rural Affairs:** The rural areas of the State have an advocate in the State government to represent their needs and protect their interests: The State Office of Rural Affairs. The RSIs serve as a resource to provide information on the needs and goals of their regions to the Office of Rural Affairs. In this manner, the Office of Rural Affairs can provide leadership in State government in addressing the issues that affect rural areas. The Office of Rural Affairs can use its cabinet-level agency status to access the decision makers and policy makers in the executive and legislative branches of State government to effect change for rural New York.

In accomplishing its purpose, the RSIs use the resources found on the college campus to provide a rural area with any assistance that may help the area to meet a local or regional need or goal. Typically, RSIs:

- provide rural community leaders with technical assistance, training and education; assistance in rural economic development and revitalization; assistance in local government management; assistance in grantsmanship training; and community planning;
- serve as a clearinghouse for information needed by local officials and serve as meeting sites for satellite teleconferences produced by the Office of Rural Affairs and other agencies;
- undertake regional studies or projects, and sponsor regional conferences on relevant local rural issues; and
- serve as a public access point for the Office of Rural Affairs RAIN computer service.

## DEVELOPMENT OF THE RSIS

The structure of the RSIs at participating colleges may vary, depending on several factors: the service mission of the college, the structure of college departments, and the particular interest of faculty and staff members of the college. The Office of Rural Affairs works with the college to formulate a development plan for the individual college RSI.

Generally, the process begins with a shared understanding between the college president and the Office of Rural Affairs of the initiative and commitment to support and maintain the RSI in a collaborative effort. The college president and other interested college faculty and staff meet with the director of Rural Affairs to discuss and sign an **Agreement** to form the Rural Services Institute. In a model RSI structure, the president of the college will designate an individual to be the **RSI Director**, who will be responsible for the operation of the RSI. The director will serve as the liaison to the Office of Rural Affairs and will report to the president of the college or a designee for the purposes of the RSI. The college will choose a department or program in which to "house" the RSI. Most colleges choose the Office of the President or a department of the college, such as: community affairs, economic development, or continuing education.

The president of the college will then appoint a **Steering Committee** to be chaired by the Director of the RSI. The steering committee will be composed of representatives of various college departments. The steering committee members will, largely, come from those departments whose services the RSI will use most. The steering committee's first task will be to conduct an **Inventory of Resources** available, both on-campus and off-campus. Resources on-campus include any faculty, administrators, students, programs, and equipment that may be of service to rural areas. For instance, student interns who receive credits for their work with the RSI may be used for much of the data gathering, research and special work of the RSI. Resources off-campus may include any federal, state, regional, or local organizations that could be of service to rural areas. The steering committee will meet on a regular basis to discuss, plan, implement and monitor RSI activities.

The steering committee will next help to define the RSI's geographical area of service. Then, with the assistance of the steering committee, the president of the college will identify and appoint a **Community Advisory Board** composed of representatives from local governments, businesses, community and other organizations to serve in an advisory capacity to the RSI regarding the types of assistance and services it should provide.

The next major task for the RSI director, the steering committee, and the community advisory board is to work with the Office of Rural Affairs to conduct a **Local Needs Assessment** to further identify those services that are needed in the area, but that are unavailable. The results of the inventory of resources and the local

needs assessment will be used to determine how the RSI may be most effective in the community.

An initial conference should then be convened with local government officials, business leaders, representatives of community organizations, federal and State officials from the region, and other interested parties to introduce the RSI to the various groups in the community. This is an opportunity to address the issues facing the region, and to begin the process of formulating a plan to meet the region's rural needs. In addition to all of the community members, the director of the Office of Rural Affairs will be present at the conference, as will the college president, the RSI director, members of the steering committee and members of the community advisory board.

## MODEL OPERATION OF THE RSIS

One person at the RSI, usually the director, will be appointed to serve as the liaison to the Office of Rural Affairs. This liaison will be responsible for periodic reporting to the Office of Rural Affairs; serve as the contact person for communications between the Office of Rural Affairs and the RSI; and attend meetings to discuss any issues relating to the RSI.

Each RSI is a voluntary organization and is intended to be self-sufficient and to operate independently. The State Office of Rural Affairs provides no monetary assistance to the RSI. The RSI must develop income sources or remuneration for its services, beyond any in-kind contributions that the college may offer, such as offices, secretarial support, computer and fax access, and RAIN access. Those sources of income or remuneration can include contracts for services with federal, state, or local governments; tuition for non-credit courses; and donations and grants from private or public sector parties. It is understood by all the RSIs, however, that one of the purposes of the program is to provide assistance that rural communities could not otherwise afford.

The RSIs are encouraged to initiate activities and projects and to operate independently. The Office of Rural Affairs, however, should be kept informed of major initiatives, and clearance should be obtained from the Office on press releases, major events and official publications or reports.

## ROLE OF THE STATE OFFICE OF RURAL AFFAIRS

The Office of Rural Affairs is committed to provide the RSIs with technical support, including assistance during and after start-up. The Office of Rural Affairs will:

1. Designate a staff person who will act as the primary contact person for RSI requests;
2. Provide RSIs with technical and legal assistance in addressing the wide range of rural issues;
3. Provide community members with training and education through the Rural Satellite Network;
4. Serve as a clearinghouse for information on State and federal programs offering rural communities grants, loans, or technical assistance;
5. Provide information on resources offered by such agencies, as: regional economic development districts, regional planning and development boards, state regional offices, municipal governments, the federal/state rural development councils, cooperative extension agencies, resource conservation and development districts, rural enterprise teams, and other state, federal or local agencies and organizations involved in rural development issues;
6. Arrange conferences and meetings between RSIs and other interested groups to share ideas on rural development and revitalization issues;
7. Undertake statewide studies or projects to augment the work of the RSIs;
8. Provide a presence for the RSIs in the State Capital, assist the RSIs in accessing State policy and decision makers with regard to State rules and statutes, review and comment on State legislation and regulations that impact rural areas, draft and support legislation on behalf of the RSIs;
9. Organize and coordinate a statewide network of RSIs to expand the available pool of resources and expertise available to each individual RSI.

## OPERATION OF THE RSIS AS A NETWORK

In order to facilitate the effective operation of the statewide network of RSIs, the Office of Rural Affairs serves as network coordinator. The Office of Rural Affairs and a planning committee, comprising representatives of each RSI, are responsible for developing administrative procedures to facilitate communication and information-sharing throughout the network.

As a network, each RSI can call upon the experience and resources of other RSIs in solving local problems. Together, all of the RSIs can address any rural issue on a statewide basis. The RSIs maintain contact with the Office of Rural Affairs, which relays information between and among the individual units in order to help solve problems and address current issues. Additionally, the Office of Rural Affairs is a participating member of many State and federal agency committees and not-for-profit organizations that serve rural areas. The information obtained through the Office's involvement in those organizations is also provided to the RSIs.

## A CASE STUDY: THE WORKING OF THE RSI AT SUNY POTSDAM

In this part we discuss the working of the Rural Services Institute (RSI) at the State University College at Potsdam. SUNY Potsdam was the 14th Institution to join the RSI Network. The discussion includes: the process used to establish RSI at the College; its mission and goals; its administration and governance structure, including funding; the process used to determine priorities; services provided and their impact; and finally, linking its activities with the College's overall educational mission.

1. **Process:** Sometime in early 1990, the NYS Office of Rural Affairs (ORA) approached the President of SUNY Potsdam about starting a RSI to meet the service needs of rural communities in the North Country. Potsdam is a small rural village of about 12,000 people located in a rural region of New York State known as the North Country. SUNY Potsdam has a long and rich history of providing services to outside groups as a part of its tradition. The College traces its origin to the St. Lawrence Academy established in 1816 in response to a local community effort. Since the College owes its existence to the community, it, therefore, regards itself as an integral part of it. The College and community take great pride in each other and cherish the long and healthy relationship they have enjoyed over the last 178 years.

   The ORA request to SUNY Potsdam could not have been more timely. The College's new president, appointed in August, 1989, believes strongly in public service and regards it an important part of the educational mission. Early in his tenure, he quickly realized the special bond which existed between the College and the community. This played an important role in sharing the College's resources with the community. However, he also realized that the College lacked a coordinated structure for providing those services. Public service activities were being carried out by various departments and individuals within the College without much overall direction. The College lacked a single office to coordinate the delivery of such services.

   Thus, the request from the ORA to start a RSI provided the President with an excellent opportunity to take a serious look at the College's approach and commitment to public service. The President asked the College's Public Affairs Council, (a body responsible for examining the College's public service activities) to review the ORA request and to make its recommendations. The Council also viewed this as a great opportunity to take a closer look at the College's

outreach activities and the manner in which they were being undertaken.

After careful review , the Council strongly recommended creating the Rural Services Institute at SUNY Potsdam and further recommended that the proposed RSI be charged with coordinating the College's public service activities to better serve the North Country. The President accepted the Council's recommendations and RSI was formally established by signing a memorandum of understanding with the New York State ORA in October 1990.

2. **Mission and Goals of RSI**: The RSI was designated as an umbrella organization responsible for coordinating the College's outreach activities. Specifically, its mission is to further enhance the interaction between SUNY Potsdam and its surrounding communities by making its intellectual and other resources available to help them improve their social and economic well being. This includes providing technical and other assistance to local governments, economic and social development organizations, labor, business, and other appropriate organizations. In providing services to outside groups, RSI was to be guided by the following broad goals:

   - Services provided must be meaningful and lead to improvement in the operation of the organization.
   - Work in close cooperation with other existing local and regional organizations. RSI should supplement and work cooperatively (not duplicate or compete) with existing organizations.
   - Services provided should be consistent with the College's educational mission and its budgetary resources and be beneficial both to the College and the community.

3. **Administrative and Governance Structure:** RSI at SUNY Potsdam functions under the Office of the President. A director, appointed by the President from among the teaching faculty at the College, manages its day to day operations. The faculty member is given release time from teaching duties. The director acts as a liaison with the ORA and maintains a close working relationship with local and regional organizations both public and private.

   The director is assisted by a RSI Steering Committee. This Committee is currently composed of 13 individuals representing various academic and administrative units within the College whose services are most frequently used by RSI for meeting outside needs. The Committee guides the work of RSI and monitors its activities. It generally meets four times a year and is chaired by the RSI director.
   Similarly, RSI receives input from outside community groups through the RSI Advisory Council. This Council is composed of 56 individuals who come from local government, health care, social services, business, labor, public education, social, cultural and economic development organizations in the North Country. The Council plays an important role in bringing the community perspective to RSI and the College. It also helps to build public support for the College in the community. The Council meets annually and is chaired by the College President, with the RSI director serving as the resource person.

   The director submits an annual report of RSI activities to the College President, members of the Steering Committee, the Advisory Council, the College's Public Affairs Council and ORA. The director keeps the college community informed of its activities through the College's weekly publication called **The Reporter.** Similarly, the outside community is kept informed through frequent news releases sent to the local and regional news media.

   Operation of the RSI is funded by the College as well as by outside groups. The half-time RSI director and a half-time technical assistant are on the College's payroll. However, the majority of RSI activities are funded through outside grants, registration fees, and consultation charges. Currently, the College provides about 20% of the RSI's annual funding, and the remaining 80% comes from outside sources. RSI, thus, imposes a minimal financial burden on the College's budget. It does not receive any financial support from ORA.

4. **Determination of Priorities:** In order for RSI to make a meaningful impact on the communities' social and economic well-being, it is important to know the type of services they believed were most important. RSI developed a lengthy survey to asses community needs. The questionnaire was sent to 350 organizations in the North Country region asking them to rank their needs in priority order.

   Nearly 60% of the survey questionnaires were returned. The results indicated an urgent need for many services. That was not surprising given the rural nature of the North Country. Most organizations, including local governments, are under-staffed, under-funded, and often lack the needed expertise to carry out their work effectively. The most urgent needs identified were: grant writing assistance, computer assistance, health care, social services, planning and zoning, economic development, and fund raising. The study, Assessing Public Service Needs of Rural Communities in the North Country was published by RSI in November 1991.

   However, it was also important to know the type of expertise and other resources available at SUNY Potsdam which could be utilized to meet the community needs as identified in the study. RSI conducted a survey to determine the expertise of the College's faculty and staff and their willingness to participate in public service activities. The survey results were published in 1992 in the form of a directory: Potsdam College and Community Service.

5. **Services Provided and Their Impact:** RSI has striven to meet the community needs identified in the survey. It has utilized the resources available at the College and those of ORA. The following is the brief description of the services RSI continues to provide.

   a. *Grant Writing*: Since assistance in grant writing was identified as the number one community need, RSI accorded it a high priority. It approached the director of SUNY Potsdam Office of Faculty Scholarship and Grants to design a workshop on grant writing suitable for community people, most of whom were often unfamiliar with the grant writing process and were, thus, afraid to apply for grants.
   The director was extremely cooperative and developed a workshop on the basics of grant writing. The workshops were called, "ABCs of Grant Writing." Since the Fall of 1991, RSI has organized eight workshops including one held on May 26, 1994. Nearly 35 people have participated in each workshop.
   The demand for grant writing training still remains very high. RSI maintains a list of people who could not be accommodated in a particular workshop, and they are given priority for the next session. In addition, RSI published a Grant Preparation Handbook: A Brief Guide to Proposal Development written by Mr. Ronald Saufley based on the notes he used in conducting the workshops. About 300 copies of the Handbook have been distributed to various organizations and individuals in the North Country.
   RSI has received extremely positive feedback for its efforts in meeting this important community need. This, of course, could not have been accomplished without the cooperation from the director of the Office of Faculty Scholarship and Grants. RSI will continue to offer at least two grantsmanship workshops a year. The cost for this training is covered through a nominal registration fee of twenty dollars.

   b. *Social Services*: The North Country is divided into seven counties. Each county has a Department of Social Services (DSS) whose responsibility is to provide public assistance to the people eligible to receive it. Each DSS is headed by a social services commissioner. Staff development is extremely important for DSS employees in order for them to keep abreast of changing technologies, rules and regulations, and to enhance their overall efficiency and effectiveness.

   The North Country is sparsely populated, rural and distant from major population centers. Consequently, the DSS employees from the North Country counties had to travel long distances at considerable cost, both in time and money, to attend training workshops in major metropolitan areas of the State. While the training was often free, counties had to

pay travel and lodging costs. It was not unusual for employees to spend three days away from work to attend a one-day training workshop. Naturally, this severely limited the number of employees who could take advantage of the training.

SUNY Potsdam was approached to consider providing training to the DSS employees locally. This need was also identified in the survey conducted by RSI. The social services commissioners saw the benefit of having local training for their staff which they could directly influence. RSI worked with the seven county commissioners and formed a North Country Coalition of Social Services Commissioners. The Coalition selects one of its members as chair. It determines the training needs of the DSS employees for each year and the mechanism for meeting those needs. RSI provides logistical and substantive support to the Coalition in theses areas: determination of the annual training needs, selection of instructors, development of curriculum for each training topic, delivery of training, evaluation of training, and, finally, execution of follow-up activities.

Since the inception of the Coalition in 1991, RSI has provided training to 1000 employees in more than 12 topics, such as, Team Building, Enhancing Productivity, Stress Management, Interviewing Skills, Secretarial Skills, and Communication Skills. The training workshops are held in different sites in the North Country so as to minimize travel time for the employees. RSI utilizes faculty from its own College and from other nearby colleges. These instructors know the area and the environment within which the DSS staff must work. RSI takes great satisfaction in facilitating this training program and, thereby, making an important impact on the overall effectiveness of DSS. The program is funded through an annual grant by the NYS Department of Social Services.

c. *Health Care*. Shortages of health care professionals was identified as a major problem in the RSI survey. To deal with this, RSI convened representatives from the St. Lawrence County Public Health Department and local hospitals in St. Lawrence and Franklin counties of the North Country. RSI decided to focus initially on two nearby counties and expand its efforts to other counties as it gained experience in this area.

A RSI Health Care Providers Advisory Group was constituted, and one of the representatives was selected to chair it. The Group decided to work toward utilizing local colleges and universities in alleviating the shortages of health care professionals in area hospitals. As its first task, the Group chose to document the degree of shortages of various health care professionals. RSI provided the logistical support in designing a questionnaire and in conducting the survey. The survey focused on 23 health care professions. Health care providers were asked to indicate the relative degree of shortages in each area. After reviewing the results, the Group targeted three major areas: Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), medical technologists, and ancillary health professions.

The Group met with other colleges in the area to explore the possibility of developing a BSN degree program for those who already had a two-year nursing degree. The colleges were made aware that most nurses seeking a BSN would be taking courses on a part-time basis and most often in the evenings. The colleges were asked if they could adapt their curriculum and course offerings to meet this need.

The Group received positive responses from the two SUNY colleges in the area, one in Plattsburgh the other being SUNY Potsdam (located 90 miles apart). SUNY Plattsburgh, which offers the BSN degree, agreed to offer telenursing courses at different locations in the North Country so that the nursing students seeking a BSN would not have to travel too far. SUNY Potsdam, which does not offer a BSN, agreed to offer general education and other elective courses to meet the SUNY Plattsburgh BSN degree requirements. Thus, the two colleges, working together, responded positively to the local health care problem after being made aware of possible solutions by the Group.

Similarly, the Group met with admissions and other appropriate staff at SUNY Potsdam to explore the possibility of existing medical technicians with a two-year degree obtaining a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Science (BA/BS) degree at the College within two years. After a careful review of the courses taken by a medical technician at a two-year college, and the additional courses and other requirements for the BA degree at SUNY Potsdam, it became clear that one could complete a BA in two years at SUNY Potsdam. However, such a program would require careful academic advising in the selection of appropriate courses. SUNY Potsdam offered to provide the needed academic and other advising support to medical technicians desiring to seek a BA at the College.

Thus, the Group was able to open up a new career path for the existing medical technicians. Currently, the Group is working on the ancillary health professions. Throughout this process, RSI provided logistical and other appropriate support to the Health Care Advisory Group, which greatly facilitated its work.

d. *Economic Development*. Geographically, the North Country is a vast region isolated from the major population centers. Economically, it is also much less developed than other parts of New York State. Its current per capita income is about 75% of the State's average, and its population density is about one-tenth the State's average. Economic development is a high priority for the region. Almost every local government in the region has programs designed to promote development.

The survey conducted by RSI indicated the strong need for developing a greater interaction and networking among various agencies engaged in economic development. Information sharing was identified as an important need. In the summer of 1993, RSI proposed the idea of having a regional economic development newsletter to bridge the communication gap to the North Country Alliance (NCA), a body composed of local and regional economic developers. The NCA liked the idea and agreed to partially fund the newsletter. Additional funds were provided by the Niagara-Mohawk Power Corporation, (a regional utility).

RSI has already published three issues of the *North Country Economic Development Newsletter* including one in May 1994. The *Newsletter* is published quarterly and features articles and items relating to regional economic development. It is distributed to over 850 individuals and offices interested in economic development in the North Country. The *Newsletter* has an Advisory Board (composed of area professional economic developers) which provides guidance with regard to its contents. The RSI director serves as managing editor. The initial response to the *Newsletter* has been positive. However, it is too early to make any final judgment on whether it has really succeeded in overcoming the communication gap.

In October 1993, RSI also published a booklet called, *Socio-Economic Profile of the North Country: Selected Economic and Social Indicators*. The booklet provides statistical information on the region's per capita income, population growth, poverty rate, employment data, etc. It is expected to be updated annually.

In addition, RSI provides technical and consultative service to organizations engaged in economic development. For example, RSI is currently assisting the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe's Economic Development Office in conducting a feasibility study for a shopping mall in that community. RSI also provided technical assistance to the Village of Potsdam for its application to New York State to be designated as an Economic Development Zone. Through such services as indicated above, RSI responds to the needs expressed by economic development agencies and, thus, plays a supporting role in addressing the economic needs of the region. RSI services to economic development organizations are financially self-supporting.

e. *Local Government*: Most rural regions in the United States are characterized by many small local governments. It is not uncommon to find a village with a population of less than 1000 having its own government. Among the rural communities, there is a strong tradition of self-reliance and of having freedom to manage its own affairs. The North Country is no exception to this phenomenon. St. Lawrence County (home of SUNY Potsdam), with a population of about 110,000, has 47 local governments. Thus, there is a high degree of fragmentation, duplication of efforts, and high cost in delivery of public services due to the small size of most governments. As a result, most local governments do not have adequate staff and budgetary resources to carry out their civic obligations.

Some of these problems and the need to deal with them were identified by local governments in the RSI survey. Most local governments indicated that they needed technical assistance in grant writing, planning, zoning, rural housing, transportation, tax structure, and community development. To meet these and other needs, RSI established a Local Government Issues Advisory Group composed of 12-13 representatives from village, town, and county governments as well as from the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe (Native Americans). The Group focused on the two counties of St. Lawrence and Franklin because it was believed that neither RSI nor the Group had enough resources to do a good job if there efforts extended much further. The Group is chaired by the Mayor of the Village of Potsdam. It sets its own agenda and priorities. RSI provides logistical and other appropriate support to facilitate the work of the Group.

After a careful review of the needs identified by various local governments, the Group believed that having an annual conference focusing on issues confronting the North Country, particularly St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties, would indeed be the best way to meet the needs of those working in local government. RSI conducted another survey seeking input from local governments on the idea of having an annual conference and the type of issues on which the conference should focus. Response to the survey was quite positive. The first conference was held in September, 1992. The theme of the conference was: New Approaches to Local Government and Community Development: Sensible Strategies for Tough Times. The conference included workshops on: "Real Property Tax", "Solid Waste Management: Grants in the Community Development Process", and "Consolidation and Cooperation". Again, response to this conference was extremely positive, and almost 92% of the participants asked for the continuation of the conferences.

The Group organized the second annual conference held in September, 1993. The theme of this conference was: *Doing More With Less: Challenges Facing Government, Business, and Community*. It included workshops on: "Effective Lobbying Techniques", "More Efficient Government Through Total Quality Management", and, "Public Infrastructure Improvement Money". The Group is currently planning the third annual conference in September, 1994. It can be safely said that these conferences would not have been held if RSI did not provide the needed support and took care of the arrangements for organizing them. These conferences are now seen as a forum not only for getting answers to the problems confronting local government officials, but also for networking and building partnerships. Both annual conferences were well attended.

In addition, RSI at SUNY Potsdam has been a regular site for receiving teleconferences on local government issues. These are made available to local government officials and to the general public at a nominal charge ($10). In 1993, six teleconferences were made available on such topics as, planning and zoning, rural housing, rural health care, consolidation. These teleconferences are produced by the New York State Office of Rural Affairs and broadcast throughout the State. Local arrangements for these teleconferences are made by RSI. RSI charges a registration fee and seeks contributions from local businesses to defray the costs connected with the annual conferences and teleconferences.

f. *Public Education Seminars*: RSI organizes seminars on topics of general interest to the public and these are open to them at no charge. In 1993, RSI held two seminars: "The ABCs of First-Time Home Buying" and "The ABCs of Managing Money". The first seminar was attended by 98 people and the second by 75. RSI is planning to hold two seminars in 1994. These seminars are sponsored and funded by the St. Lawrence County Bankers' Association.

g. *Computer Assistance*: This was one of the needs identified in the initial RSI survey. However, RSI has not, as yet, been able to meet this need because of the non-availability of appropriate staff to provide this assistance. RSI has attempted to meet this need on a selective basis by providing student interns majoring in Computer and Information Sciences at SUNY Potsdam. In 1993, RSI placed four students as interns. RSI is currently working with other organizations in the area to meet this need.

6. **Linking Teaching and Research with Public Service:** As mentioned, SUNY Potsdam regards public service as an important part of its educational mission. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the public service activities of the College are actually integrated into its teaching and scholarly functions. RSI has always been conscious of this institutional expectation. Below are examples of initiatives RSI has taken to develop and promote this linkage.

a. *The Walker Foundation North Country Research Fellowships*: The Fellowship Program is designed to encourage research on local and regional issues by faculty at the ten colleges and universities located in the North Country. In addition, the Program calls for having a co-investigator from the local community to ensure that research is relevant to the region. The Program is funded by the Walker Foundation. In 1994, six projects were funded: "Artificial Regeneration and Ecological Restoration of Black Ash", "Music in Our Lives: What Makes Opera? The H.M.S. Pinafore", "North Country Economic Indicators", "The Development of an Alcohol Awareness Program for Community-Dwelling North Country Older Persons", "Investigation of Suitable Additive for Improving the Properties of Massena Clay for the North Country Landfill Lining Systems", and, "An Empirical Study of Effective Boards of Directors and Performance of Local Development Corporations in Northern New York". Each project was awarded between $ 500 and $ 2,000 based on recommendations made by the Fellowships' Advisory Council. Projects were eligible for funding of up to $ 8,000.

The Walker Foundation North Country Fellowship Advisory Council composed of 17 members representing different constituencies in the North Country, reviews the applications and makes its recommendations to the President and Foundation for their final approval. The Advisory Council also recommends the amount of funding for each recommended project. The Program is administered by the RSI. It has been well received by the area educational institutions and community groups because it not only creates a greater interaction among them but also enables the faculty to utilize its expertise in providing solutions to problems confronting the region. Because of the positive response the Program generated in its first year, it has now been funded for two more years.

b. *SUNY Potsdam Faculty Research on North Country Program*: This Program is similar to the Walker Foundation Fellowship described above except that it is open only to the faculty at SUNY Potsdam. One to four research awards, usually ranging from $500 to $2000 are given each year. The RSI Steering Committee reviews applications and makes its recommendations (including the amount of funding for each project) to the President for final approval.

In 1993, the projects funded included: "Lead Analysis in Water", "The Furtherance of Local Court Justice in Rural Areas: North Country Perspective from St. Lawrence County", and "Seismicity and Shallow Subsurface Geophysical Studies". The projects funded in 1994 include:

"The New Economy at Akwesasne", "Innovative Marketing Network for St. Lawrence County Craftworkers", and "Assessing the Management Information Processing Training Needs in the North Country". The Program is funded by SUNY Potsdam's Office of Faculty Research and Grants. It is expected to continue in the future.

c. *Student Internships*: So far, placing students as interns with public and private organizations has been the only way of linking teaching and public service. RSI was able to place six students as interns in 1993 and 1994. In addition to getting academic credit for the internship, the students gain "real world" experience by working with the organizations. The organizations also benefit because they get needed help at no cost.

## CONCLUSION

The Rural Services Institutes successfully tap the resources and expertise found at rural college and university campuses to provide a wide variety of services to rural governments, businesses, organizations and individuals. As the case study of the SUNY Potsdam RSI indicates, RSI can make a difference in the quality of life for rural communities. Many of the activities undertaken by Potsdam's RSI would not have happened otherwise. Rural communities are richer because they had RSI working **for** them and **with** them.

The RSIs operate as individual units to meet the unique needs of the communities in which they are located, and as a network to provide a collaborative approach to solving rural problems on a statewide level. The RSIs are designed to operate independently, with little cost to the State and with few bureaucratic constraints. Most of the services described in the case study are self-supporting. The RSI network is just one of the many approaches that can be taken to address rural issues and problems. RSI works by brining people together, to promote partnerships which benefits everyone.

[1] James A. Christenson and Cornelia B. Flora eds., "*A Rural Policy Agenda for the 1990s*," Rural Policies for the 1990s (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1992), 333.

[2] U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis.

[3] N.Y. Executive Law Section 480 (Mckinney 1994)

[4] N.Y. Executive Law Section 480 (Mckinney 1994)

[5] N.Y. Education Law Section 351 (Mckinney 1994)